

FEBRUARY 2026 - ISSUE #1



# MAGE

THE MAGAZINE TO DISCOVER SOMETHING NEW



# IT'S ALL ABOUT THE GAMES

For eight years, The Thirsty Mage Podcast has been devoted to the idea of sharing personal experiences within the community in an effort to enhance everyone's appreciation of video games. Whether it's shining a light on lesser known titles, or helping to shape the perceptions on misunderstood games, the podcast works towards helping everyone enjoy video games to their fullest.

With hundreds of thousands of titles spanning over multiple decades, it's impossible to play every single game out there. This magazine is another medium for the hosts of the podcasts to share their experiences to either point those towards good experiences, or maybe even warn against not-so-great ones.

No stone goes unturned in our pursuit of fun video game experiences. From the early days of Atari, all the way to modern releases on the Nintendo Switch 2, our writers share the good, the bad, and the ugly as they set out on a journey to document every great experience they come across.

As a small indie magazine, word of mouth is key. Our only ask of all our readers is that if you enjoy reading about video games, old and new, please share it with a friend. Maybe even post about it on social media.

We hope you enjoy this issue!

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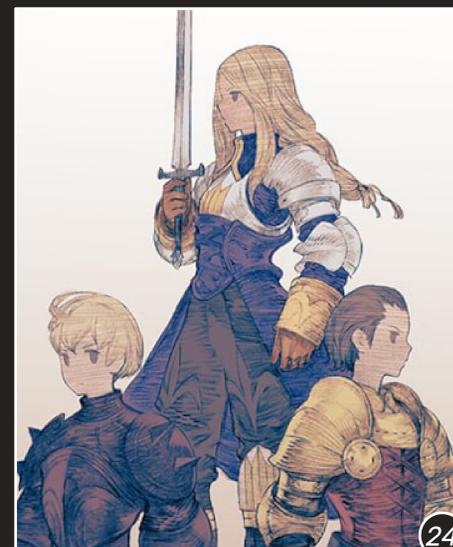
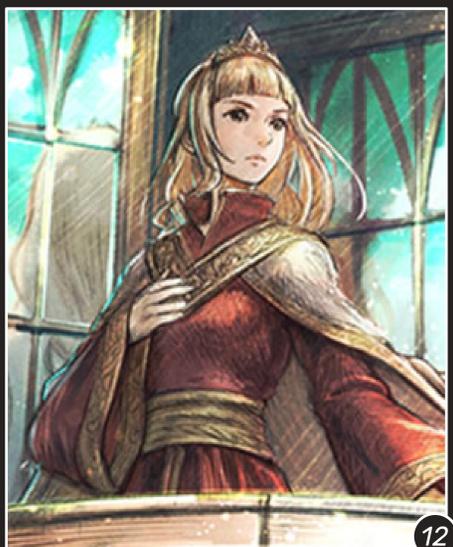
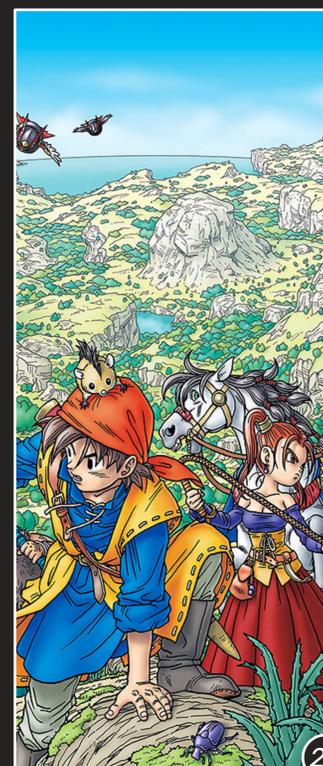
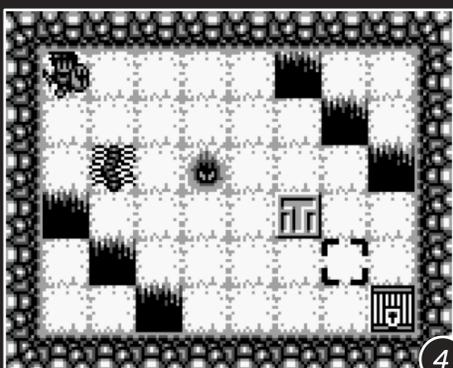
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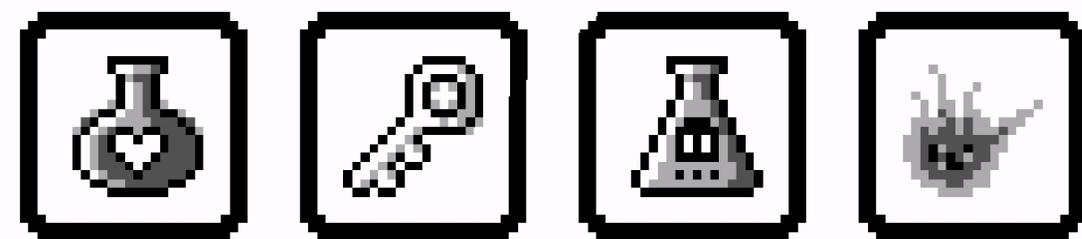
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WRITTEN BY DAVID LLOYD

CAVE NOIRE

GAME BOY



HOW LONG TO BEAT

~ 5 HOURS

DEVELOPER

KONAMI

RELEASED

1991

HOW TO PLAY

Cave Noire never received an official localization, so if you'd like to play this piece of Konami history, you'll need to do some research on how to apply localization patches.

RomHacking.Net is a great resource for folks looking for hidden gems that never made it to the West.

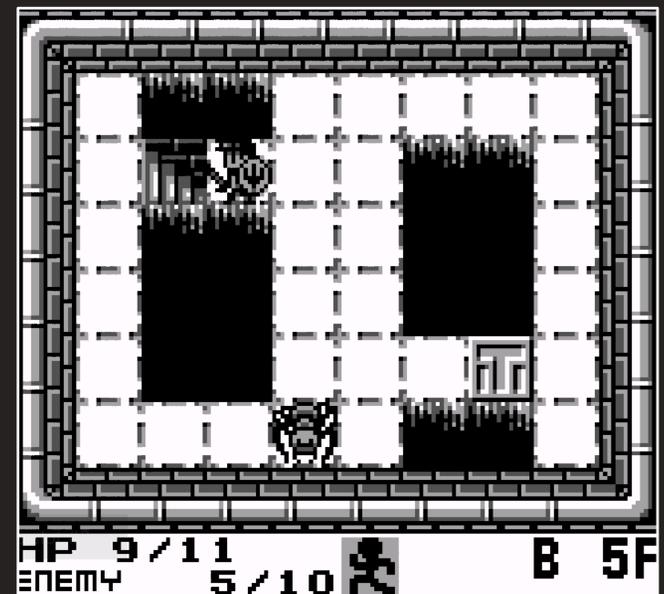
Long before the Roguelike genre would come to dominate the indie scene, Konami published their own take on the Nintendo Game Boy in Japan. After some fumbling about with a translation patch, I enjoyed several hours traversing the dungeons while trying to keep my buddy Pentaro alive. Cave Noire is not a game I would sit down and play for hours at a time, but it sure is fun in short entertaining bursts.

Cave Noire features randomly generated dungeons with four possible objectives: Kill "x" number of monsters, collect gold, collect orbs, and save fairies. The premise is to get in, use the randomly assigned items prior to your journey plus others you find in the dungeon to complete whichever objective you have chosen, and get out... Alive. The mystery dungeon-style gameplay is pretty simplistic but I found myself in the "just one more run" loop pretty quickly. Combat is pretty simple, just walk up next to an enemy and start hacking away before they can defeat you. The attack strength of both your character and the enemy are based upon their stats, along with the RNG gods. Depending on the enemy and your current health situation, avoidance may be the best course of action. This requires careful studying of how enemies react based on your own movement. Some enemies have a set path they follow, others will make come right after you. Like any good mystery dungeon, the player needs to balance risk and reward based on the layout of the floor and what is needed to complete the objective.

Being a Konami game, the music is pretty decent for what the hardware can handle. The visuals aren't too shabby either, the pixel design is fairly detailed despite the low resolution. The Game Boy is still an excellent platform for tracking down hidden gems. As Cave Noire has proven, there's still plenty of unlocalized hidden gems waiting to be found.



Another successful dungeon raid...

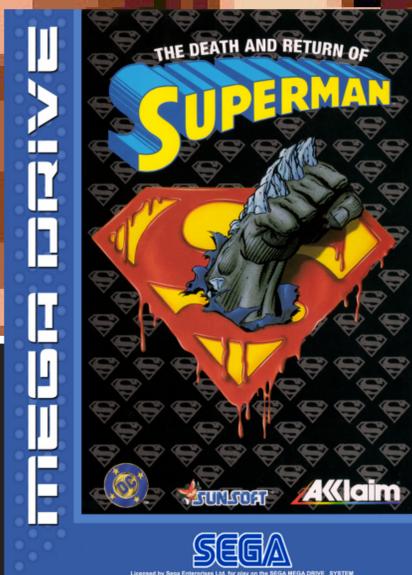


Do I attack or make a run for it?

WRITTEN BY DAVID LLOYD

# THE DEATH AND RETURN OF SUPERMAN

SEGA GENESIS



**HOW LONG TO BEAT**

~ 2 HOURS

**DEVELOPER**

BLIZZARD ENTERTAINMENT

**RELEASED**

1991

**INTERESTING NOTE**

The Death and Return of Superman is the first game officially developed under the name: Blizzard Entertainment. The company originally known as Silicon & Synapse, Inc. went through a few name changes until finally settling on a name that didn't already have a registered trademark.

Growing up in a smaller Canadian city, I rarely encountered a Sega Genesis before I turned 18. Nintendo was king in my circle, so Sega consoles have always been a major blind spot for me. I chose to play The Death and Return of Superman specifically because it was the first game developed under the Blizzard name. I could say the game was boring and repetitive, but I prefer to look at it this way: my Genesis/Mega Drive adventure can only get better from here.

The story begins, unsurprisingly, with the death of Superman. As the original Man of Steel, you fight through two stages before finally meeting your demise at the hands of Doomsday. From that point on, the game follows the famous comic book arc, with the player taking the helm as several different Superman substitutes. While the side-scrolling beat 'em up action is decent and the game is pleasant to look at, it has its flaws. Each version of Superman has a melee attack, a projectile, and the ability to fly. The combat is fun enough, but enemies often feel like "damage sponges" that take much more punishment than they should. Furthermore, the same enemies are reused constantly and the boss fights are surprisingly easy.

In between stages, the Death and Return of Superman story is told through cinematic comic book panels. It's a very "Coles Notes" version of the overall story, focusing more on the cast of characters than the details, but the art is really neat to look at.

Ultimately, the entire experience wrapped up in about two hours. It isn't the pinnacle of '90s action games, but I have no regrets playing through this piece of Blizzard Entertainment history.



Why does Superman have a health bar?



The Eradicator has the coolest costume



★★★★☆

I GOT 5 ON IT

FAVOURITE DRAGON QUEST



WRITTEN BY JORDAN RUDEK

With all of the recent Dragon Quest remakes, I've been salivating at the prospect of my favorite Dragon Quest getting a modern remake—Dragon Quest V: Hand of the Heavenly Bride. The DS version, itself a remake, was my first exposure to DQ5, but it wasn't until much later than the 2009 release that I would end up playing through the game for the first time. In fact, it was the Dragon Quest VII and VIII remakes that came to 3DS that prompted my massive foray into the long running RPG series.

If I could only marry one, though, it would be Hand of the Heavenly Bride, a game in which you actually can only marry one character. But that's only part of the fun. Its multi-generational story, excellent, classic gameplay, and monster recruiting system make it an easy recommendation for someone's first Dragon Quest. As much as I do enjoy a good job system, the RPGs I've always looked back most fondly on are those that pour their energy into other elements of the genre, while also not distracting me with job points and customization.

For me, being able to add monsters to your human team was just the right amount of spice for Dragon Quest V. With Valentine's Day coming up, I thought to focus on the marriage event within Hand of the Heavenly Bride. Closer to the end of the game's first half, you get to choose one of three potential partners, each with their own strengths as party members. While Bianca, the hero's childhood friend, seems to represent the canonical choice and the one with whom you will have already built up the most rapport, she's also the middle ground in terms of her combat prowess. Nera is the only one I've never personally chosen, but she's a powerful mage who (unsurprisingly) lacks physical strength.



USING ALL OF THE NINTENDO DS REAL ESTATE

HOW LONG TO BEAT

~ 35 HOURS

DEVELOPER

CHUNSOFT (SFC)  
ARTEPIAZZA (PS2, DS)

RELEASED

1992 (SFC) / 2009 (DS)



The last time I played through Dragon Quest V was before I wrote a chapter on it for my book, A Game In The Life, and it was on this playthrough that I selected Deborah, the best option for a physical fighter of the three, but I'd argue also the most entertaining in terms of her dialogue. It's also quite endearing to see her affection for you come out amidst the barbs she regularly tosses at you.

In the world of RPGs, marriage events are usually reserved for the end of the game, once the great evil has been slain and peace has been restored to the land. Dragon Quest V, though, makes getting married a central part of its narrative, leading into how your party grows in conjunction with the story's time jumps.

If you look at the marriage plot point compared against relationship mechanics in other titles, like the Persona series, the latter is concerned with unlocking cutscenes and making your partner or friend more competent in (and sometimes out) of battle.

Conversely, Hand of the Heavenly Bride asks you to weigh both the personality and potential gameplay benefits of opting for one candidate over the other two; it's a decision set in stone once you make it, potentially leaving you to ponder what could have been, no matter your choice. Before and after the wedding, what really makes Dragon Quest V so compelling is that it manages to tell a cohesive, engaging story that involves multiple time jumps, which is no small feat. It's easy to look back as the credits roll at earlier points in the plot and see them as inconsequential or having little resonance for the overall narrative, but it's almost impossible to do so for DQ5 because part of its charm is in growing up with this world and its characters, and not just those travelling in your party.

I'm certain we'll get a contemporary remake of Dragon Quest V, but I'm not sure what form I want it to take. My ultimate hope is that it remains faithful to the original, which is already a masterpiece and one of the finest RPGs ever created. That said, don't wait for Square Enix to bring it back! Seek out the game this year and maybe it'll become your favorite Dragon Quest, too!

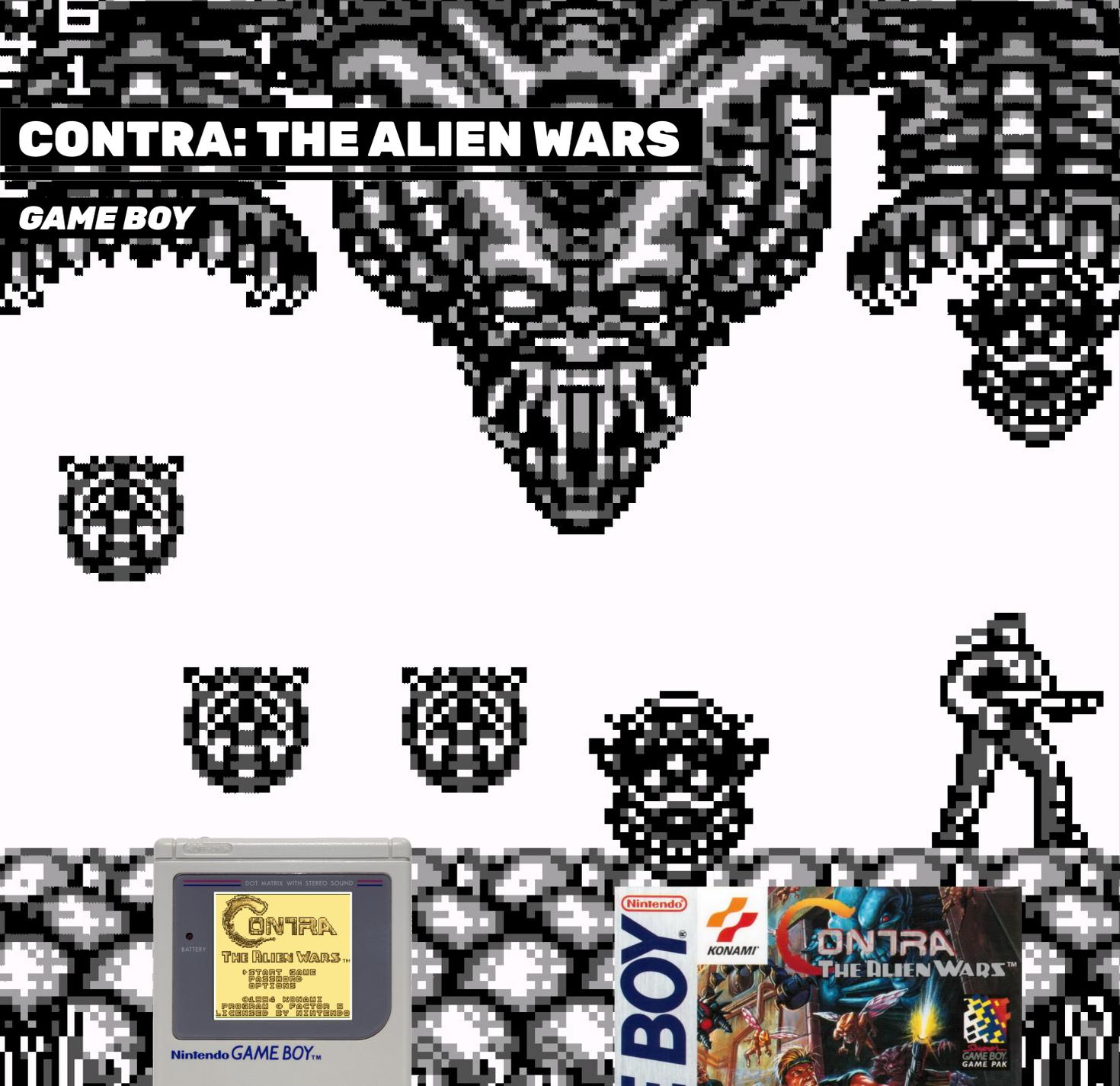
- PAGE 4 & 5 OF THE DRAGON QUEST V MANUAL



WRITTEN BY DAVID LLOYD

# CONTRA: THE ALIEN WARS

GAME BOY



**HOW LONG TO BEAT**

**~ 1 HOUR**

**DEVELOPER**

**FACTOR 5**

**RELEASED**

**1994**

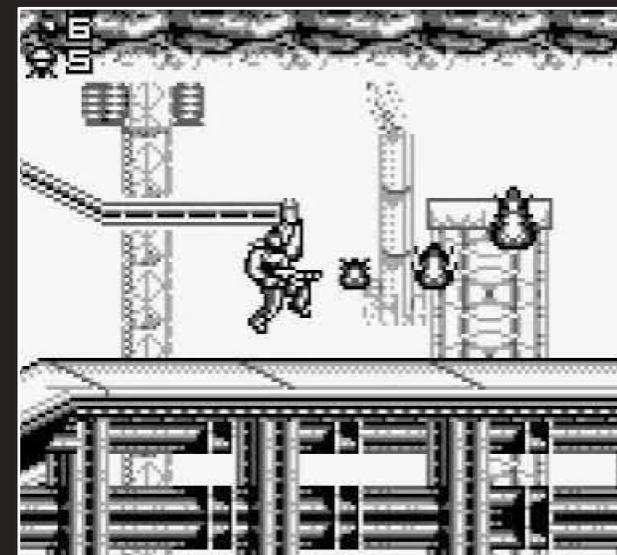
**RECOMMENDED VERSION**

Konami has released many different versions of Contra: the Alien Wars. The Super Nintendo version is considered by many to be the best of the franchise, while the Game Boy Advance version is considered a compromised version of the former. The Game Boy port by Factor 5 is kinda its own thing given the platform.

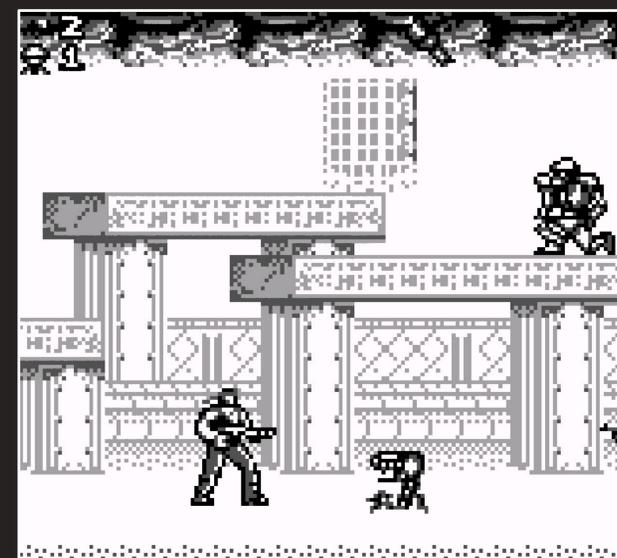
Konami was a juggernaut during the NES and Game Boy era, and I spent countless hours lost in their iconic "silver box" titles. The Contra franchise remains a particular favorite; I've poured more time into the original and Super C than I'd like to admit. Their quintessential run-and-gun gameplay solidified them as NES classics that remain just as playable today as they were in the 90s. Naturally, I had some apprehension about whether their handheld counterparts could deliver, but I was pleasantly surprised.

I initially assumed that hardware limitations would prevent Contra on the Game Boy from living up to the franchise's legacy. Between the cramped screen real estate and reduced processing power for sprites, my concerns weren't entirely unfounded. The Alien Wars is undeniably a step down from its console brethren, yet the core gameplay remains remarkably solid on the small screen. Most of the classic arsenal—including the Machine Gun and Spread Shot—is present, alongside newer favorites like the Homing Missile. Movement feels crisp and responsive, and the game largely avoids the frustration of "cheap" deaths. The Alien Wars features five stages: three in left-to-right side scrolling, and two stages in an overhead perspective. If you can manage to make it through the whole game on one try, it can be done in about an hour. Unfortunately, the Konami code will not provide 30 lives, but thankfully some other helpful codes can be found on GameFAQs to give you a very useful advantage.

Part of the allure of Contra is its over-the-top, bombastic energy. While the Game Boy version squeezes every last drop of power out of the system, the experience shifts away from frantic blasting toward a more methodical approach to survival. It's always fascinating to see how developers bypassed handheld constraints; limitations often reveal a team's true skill, and The Alien Wars proves that Konami's 90s roster was full of clever designers.



*Pretty decent graphics for the Game Boy*



*I'm here to blow stuff up...*

OCTOPATH TRAVELER REVIEW

I did it!

I finally finished an Octopath Traveler game and all it took was turning a mobile gacha game into a regular retail release with extra content and no gambling involved. Somehow they still managed to upcharge for Christmas decorations for a game that was released in early December.

We're heading back to Orsterra in Octopath Traveler 0, a prequel set a few years before the first game's timeline. Instead of juggling eight different characters, you're in the driver's seat of a custom protagonist. You get to pick their favorite food and their starting gear, both of which they'll desperately need after surviving the classic 'my hometown was burned to a crisp' origin story.

Unlike many games where the loss of a home is merely a catalyst for adventure, this title focuses on the immediate labor of reconstruction and the search for surviving residents. While the marketing framed the journey as a choice between revenge and rebuilding, the two paths aren't actually at odds; in fact, players can successfully pursue both simultaneously.

While the Wishvale arc is pleasant enough, the main slice of the pie lies in toppling the first three 'Big Bads', even if their relevance fades in later chapters.



The narrative eventually blossoms into a sprawling epic of tragedy and warfare. Many compared Final Fantasy XVI to Game of Thrones, but the early hours of Octopath 0 actually fits the bill a whole lot more. And while the writing remains mature and competent throughout, it does lean into more generic tropes as it nears the finale.

As the third entry, it introduces more than just a custom lead (who, I eventually discovered, possesses a distinct personality of their own). The most obvious change is the combat: a lane-based system featuring a full eight-person party. Characters are paired up and can swap instantly without burning a turn, making the 'Shield Break' loop feel incredibly snappy—especially at 2x speed. With a massive roster of 35 recruits, including the (admittedly non-canonical) cast of the first game, the strategic depth is immense. Each recruit boasts unique, non-transferable abilities that ensure they aren't just redundant class clones. These characters are fleshed out through mini-stories and charming vignettes, turning me into a lifelong Isla fan, even if I have to accept that he's a boy.

The normal difficulty was a bit of a breeze until the final arc hit me like a wall. It's a little bizarre that the best strategy boils down to copying Olberic's ability just to break that 9,999 damage cap with one attack. I didn't exactly help myself by doing a 'no-nut' run, but I can be a squirrel if I want to be. Ultimate attacks become absolute lifesavers here, they scale up to three tiers and you'll want to use them constantly. I lost count of how many times a fully upgraded Aelfric's Blessing pulled my team back from the brink.

The Path Action system has also seen a significant overhaul, with the original eight actions being streamlined and rearranged. You can now Entreat, Purchase, or Contend with NPCs, but the real depth lies in recruiting them as combat supports. These NPCs act as a 'free move' in battle, executing specific skills with a limited number of uses per encounter. Once their total stock is depleted, you'll have to track them down in the world to re-recruit them. Beyond combat, you can invite NPCs to join your town of Wishvale where they provide passive benefits or work on the farm. While the town-building is a charming addition, you don't get total creative freedom until the post-game. This is a bit frustrating, as I'm starting to feel 'customization fatigue.' That said, progressing through the Wishvale quests is essential, as it eventually unlocks key abilities like opening special chests and even talking to animals.

The NPC writing remains a highlight, I loved encountering a 'jumpy parishioner' whose fear of ghosts was made clear by pockets stuffed with garlic and holy water. The game excels at staging memorable sequences, with the naval war arc being a particular standout. However, the true final boss (which I'm still currently stuck on) offers a level of difficulty I still can't overcome. My only real gripe is with the theme of forgiveness, it feels a bit hollow when the game allows me to kill certain characters while forcing me to spare others who, frankly, I would have much rather finished off.

Unfortunately, since this title began as a mobile game utilizing assets from the original, the low-resolution textures are horrendous to look at, with the exception of a few well-lit areas.



However, the voice acting is more than decent, it's stellar. One primary antagonist while simply MARVELLOUS, sounded so much like Trey Parker that I found myself double-checking the credits (only to find, unsurprisingly, it wasn't him).

While the game's length isn't necessarily a flaw, the pacing is hard to defend, as the final arc is bogged down by significant padding. Yet, despite the visual shortcomings, the snappy combat makes the old system feel obsolete. The writing and set-pieces make the journey worth the walk just be sure to literally walk, as running triggers far too many random encounters.



HOW LONG TO BEAT

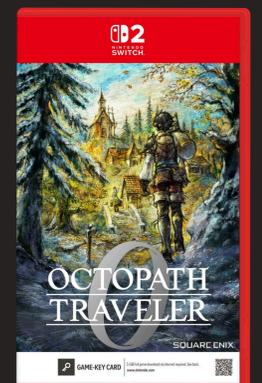
~ 80 - 100 HOURS

DEVELOPER

SQUARE ENIX

RELEASED

2025



WRITTEN BY DAVID LLOYD

HYRULE WARRIORS: AGE OF IMPRISONMENT

NINTENDO SWITCH 2



After playing Hyrule Warriors: Age of Calamity, I found the new direction of the series to not be in line with what I wanted and thus, had very little interest in Age of Imprisonment.

That was until a friend was talking it up post launch and I fell into the trap of wanting to give it another go. I'll start by saying it runs and looks great on Switch 2, offering a really smooth experience. Initially I was actually quite smitten with it. I enjoyed how different missions and objectives were opening up on the world map. For the first ten or so hours, I'd complete every node on the map before pushing onto the main story.

Eventually the number of things unlocked after a story mission became overwhelming and I decided to focus more on just the main quest plus the occasional side mission that'd unlock a new character.

The amount of content in the game is pretty staggering, especially if you're going into it with a completionist mindset. Most side content can be completed in just a few minutes, but things start to get repetitive and once you start seeing similar bosses time and time again it loses its luster.

This started to take its toll on me and I found myself at a crossroads. I could probably drop another four to six hours mainlining the story quests to see the credits roll or I could hang 'em up and call it a day. I decided on the latter and haven't regretted that decision. It's not to say Age of Imprisonment is a bad game by any means, I just think what I liked most about the first game has been lost in follow-up entries.

HOW LONG TO BEAT

~ 32 HOURS

DEVELOPER

UNSCORED

AAA GAMES STUDIO

RELEASED

2025



RATE MY FIREPLACE

For centuries, the fireplace was required in every home of the northern hemisphere to keep its occupants warm in the winter. Even though they are less common in homes today, we still see them in countless video games. For every developer, it's a battle between form and function and in this fun feature, we rank how well they got it right.

TRAILS IN THE SKY - 1ST CHAPTER

The developers hard at work in the bowels of FALCOM headquarters must be required to take engineering courses in their spare time. This fireplace as seen in the Trails in the Sky remake is a perfect fusion of form and function. The structure is made with thick stone to prevent unwanted fire, including both a full stone floor and a flue that appears to be properly venting to the outside. The wood accents provide a beautiful warmth to the area, with ample space to display picture frames if they so chose to do. Video game developers will be studying this quality craftsmanship for years to come.



★★★★★

DRAGON QUEST VII REIMAGINED

Proper fire safety regulations need to be reimagined in this example of how to quickly burn down your home with your pet pigs trapped inside. Where's the flue? Where's the fireproof floor? Where is the FIRE MARSHALL!!



☆☆☆☆☆

WRITTEN BY BRIAN H

Earthbound Beginnings began with an unusual concept, especially at the time it was conceived. Director Shigesato Itoi imagined a game whose hero wasn't just inexperienced or naive at the beginning of his journey, but weak, vulnerable, and disrespected. A child with asthma, like Itoi himself, wandering a hostile world. A boy and his friends fighting the forces of cruelty and selfishness with the tools of compassion. Someone who would begin "not at zero, but at less than zero," in his words. It was a tough sell, in an era where RPGs enmeshed players in grand heroic fantasies, of chosen heroes slaying world-conquering demons, of brutal wars and prophecies and glory. It was a hard sell, a game derisively described as "feminine." I love Dragon Quest. A tale of a heroic knight tackling the wicked dread lords with his equally courageous companions is as comforting to me as a warm blanket and a bowl of popcorn in the middle of a blizzard.

Hero fantasy is not lesser storytelling, mind you. Dragon Quest in particular is also skilled at breaking your heart (especially Dragon Quests V, VIII, and XI), but it always carries the promise that your strength will overcome the tragedies it foists upon you.

The familiar story beats, structure, and formulas turn that comforting blanket into an armor against the darkness. It'll all work out. The hero is strong enough, after all.

But I think it's worth letting yourself feel the cold, now and then. Art can only change you if you let yourself be vulnerable.

To discard your armor is to open your heart, and Earthbound Beginnings asks no more of you than that.

Decades before the core narrative begins, a young couple, George and Maria Hallway, were kidnapped by an unseen alien race and forced to raise an alien infant, Giygas, as their own son. Despite the circumstances, they loved the child that was forced upon them. A few years into their captivity, George uncovered plans by the aliens to conquer Earth. He stole the secrets of their technology and their incredible psychic powers, escaping to Earth to prepare for the invasion but leaving his family behind.

George is an enigmatic figure of great importance. He's largely responsible for both kickstarting the events of the series (it's implied that Giygas was chosen to lead the invasion as revenge for George stealing the aliens' secrets, and that the invasion was accelerated and intensified due to his betrayal) and for giving the protagonists a means to defend themselves. He's never shown in-game, at least not as a living man. There are supplemental materials that expand on his backstory and show his appearance. A single manga panel has him looking like Gregory Peck. Yet for all that impact, we only have an opening text crawl, and his final gifts to his great-grandson, Ninten, to learn about the kind of man he was. It's mentioned that he poured his life after returning home to the research of PSI and alien technology.



WRITTEN BY BRIAN H

HAILING THE MOTHERSHIP

RETROSPECTIVE

A man, ripped from his world, leaves his family to an unknown fate to prevent an apocalypse. He lives and dies in toil and solitude.

A boy awakens to wondrous gifts, to power and responsibility and to legacy. He sets out to right wrongs and to learn an eighty-year-old truth about his family.

A queen waits in a castle on the clouds. She mourns a loss she cannot remember.

Another boy hides his brilliant mind in the garbage, from pain and from bullies. He waits for a friend.

A girl dreams of a boy she's never met. She knows she loves him. She's lost her hat.

A young man buries his kind heart to rule a city's underbelly. He gathers his strength and hides his time, longing for revenge.

The cosmic destroyer betrays the love he once felt to conquer in his people's name. He spreads his rage and his shame to others, shaping them in his image.

It's impossible to ignore the influence that Earthbound has had on the RPG genre in the thirty-two years since its release. That unique blend of absurdism played straight, Charlie Brown aesthetics, and incomprehensible terror drilled its way into the impressionable brains of those open to it and laid its eggs.

The effect on me was akin to that of Homestarrunner: once I had experienced it, it hovered in the back of my mind waiting for an opportunity to say, "oh that's just like that bit in Earthbound with the trout-flavored yogurt machine." Its sequel, Mother 3, carried on its themes of love and cranked the heartbreak and tragedy dials until they snapped clean off, but still encouraged the player to never stop loving and never give up community in exchange for selfish comforts.

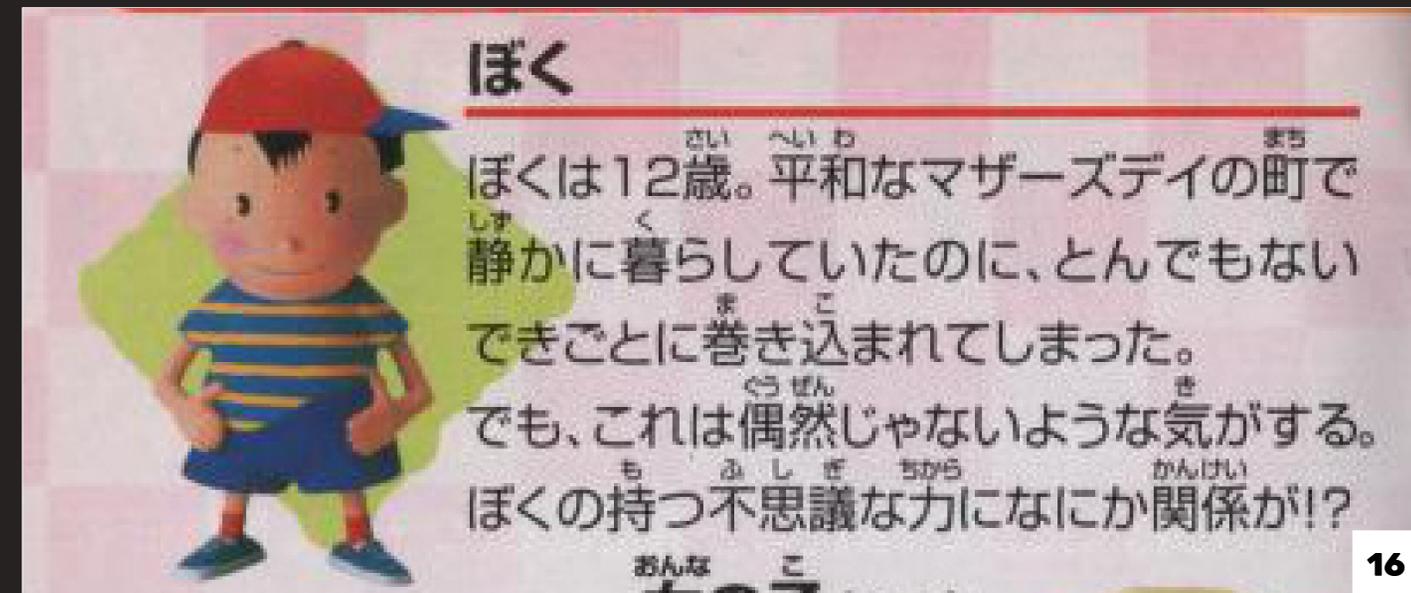
For all the joy this entire series has brought me, when I look back, it's the first game, Mother (localized as Earthbound Beginnings, the title I'll be using for the rest of this article) that I reflect on most. This isn't a review or a simple plot summary. I can tell you here I recommend the game if that's all you're looking for. There will be heavy spoilers ahead for Earthbound Beginnings. I urge you to play it through for yourself if playing it without colored expectations is important to you. I think the original NES game is a stellar experience, but there's also an anniversary edition romhack that smoothes out a few rough edges as well as an (at time of writing) upcoming fan remake for the SNES that looks like a blast. I'm of the mind that those rough edges are important to the experience, so I hope if you're interested you'll give the un-hacked NES game a try.

DIRECTOR

SHIGESATO ITOI

DEVELOPER

SHIGERU MIYAMOTO



He leaves Ninten his diary, containing clues to reach Magicant. He constructed EVE, a robotic guardian to protect his descendants from the terrible threats he knew he helped to unleash on them. His spirit, waiting at his own gravestone atop Mt. Itoi, provides Ninten the final piece of his means to confront and defeat Giygas, and to save the tormented soul of his wife.

A lot is left to interpretation about what these events did to George. He was by all accounts a devoted husband and father to Maria and Giygas, and to his later descendants. I can only imagine that his theft and escape tore him apart. He lived largely as a recluse after returning to Earth, and poured his whole life into his research and preparations. To tear your family apart, knowing that you'd be pitting your descendants against one another, is a decision that would drain the life from anyone. And yet, he toiled for the rest of his life to make sure Ninten would be not only safe and strong, but loved. George's diary points Ninten towards Magicant: a kingdom whose people assure Ninten that they are his friends. Here, everyone loves him.

Magicant as a concept would be revisited in Earthbound. It's not a single location, but a manifestation of the soul. In that game, it projects Ness' memories, fears, and the people, places, and objects he sees as important.

The Magicant of Earthbound Beginnings operates under similar rules; however, it is not built from Ninten's mind. He and his friends are visitors. This Magicant belongs to Queen Mary, the assumed identity of Ninten's great-grandmother, Maria Halloway. After George left, Maria continued to raise Giygas until she passed away. Her soul remains in Magicant, but her memories are lost to her. All she has left are fragmented longings and nightmares. Despite this, she instinctively knows that she loves Ninten and wants to offer him guidance. Pieces of a melody that must have some significance. Magicant inside and outside of her central castle and town reflects this. Friendly but odd people clumsily replicate the workings of the outside world. Dangerous monsters mimic the image of a family (Watcher, Dad Eyes, and Mom Eyes). A dragon guards a piece of the melody, and her memories, waiting until Ninten is strong enough to receive it.

Earthbound Beginnings is often criticized for its difficulty, frequency of random encounters, and character balance. From a modern perspective, these can be points of frustration. As of late, I'm finding the frictions that NES-era RPGs bring with them to be opportunities to connect to the work. Maybe these "flaws" can be the result of hardware or developmental constraints. I've heard Mt. Itoi, a sprawling gauntlet of interconnected caves filled with the game's most dangerous enemies, was "untested." Whether that's true or not, we only have the work as it is in front of us. I think these mechanical aspects have a lot to say about the game's characters and themes.

Ninten is unusual among RPG protagonists. He's not a knight in the midst of his training. He's not a prince staring down an opportunity to prove himself as the noble and glorious leader the world expects him to be. Nor is he a wandering warrior seeking revenge on a villain who destroyed his village. He's a twelve year old child, in a stable, loving family. He's asthmatic, which plays a significant role in combat (certain enemies can spew smog, which will cause Ninten to collapse into a coughing fit until he uses an inhaler or the battle ends). He has an affinity for baseball, which lets him equip some of the game's stronger weapons and can give him a mean swing. Other than Teddy, he's your strongest physical attacker and can take the most hits from enemies. He doesn't start the game that way though.

When the game begins, Ninten gets a few freebie introductory battles at home against a possessed lamp and a haunted doll to show the player how battles work (it's essentially Dragon Quest's combat system: attack, use PSI abilities, use items, guard, or run away).

After picking up George's diary, Ninten leaves home to investigate the cause of the poltergeist's attack, as well as strange incidents cropping up around the country.

The player is immediately made aware that Ninten is not prepared for this kind of journey. Enemies in the area surrounding Ninten's home have a solid chance of kicking the crud out of him. Ninten can hold his own against some of them, slowly building his strength, but his neighbor Wally seems intent on sending him home with fresh bruises.

I can see this being something of a red flag to many players. A game over screen is usually a sign of failure, a result of the player's wrong choices or lack of knowledge. But Earthbound Beginnings doesn't punish failure harshly: game over is not really game over. It takes another important cue from Dragon Quest: having your party wiped out only results in the player losing half the money they're carrying and getting sent back to the last place they saved their game. At this point in Ninten's journey, you're getting sent back maybe ten or fifteen steps from his home.

Children learn and practice independence in stages. Kids gradually become more comfortable being further away from their parents for longer periods of time, secure in the knowledge that love and comfort are there when they need it. It's not a strict linear progression, either. Sometimes they need it more. Sometimes less. I see this process in Ninten's first steps from his home. The world outside is terrifying for a kid on his own: Wally's right around the corner. But home is still there. Ninten's mom, Carol, is always ready to help him rest up, his dad is a phone call away and will save his progress and give him a little spending money, and his sister, Minnie, can help manage his items.

In particular, I love the reframing of how money is acquired compared to other RPGs. Rather than looting cash from defeated enemies (Ninten would essentially be mugging his neighbors by doing that), Ninten gets an equivalent amount of cash every time he calls up his dad. Just one more clever way to blend theme and mechanics.

No matter how far Ninten travels or what he goes through, his home and family will always be a place of safety for him. It's there for the player too: the early game's difficulty is brutal, but you can always come home and try again. Later on, Magicant serves a similar role. In any outdoor area in the game, Ninten can use the skyhook to travel back to Magicant, the world where everyone loves him, to rest up and set back out when he's ready.

That support is Ninten's real strength.

He's sturdier than Ana or Lloyd, sure, but the love he's received from his family reflects in his mechanical abilities too. All of Ninten's PSI abilities are related to support or healing. He doesn't learn offensive spells like Ana, can't use battle items like Lloyd, and he's nowhere near as tough as Teddy. Ninten brings out the strength in others, by shielding or empowering them, by pulling them out of danger, or by speeding the group's travels. As the player character, Ninten doesn't get a lot of dialogue in this game beyond simple yes/no responses. A lot has to be inferred from the way other characters treat and react to him, and what his actions and abilities say about him. PSI is an extension of the mind, after all. Ninten's mind is on helping the people around him more than anything. Selflessness as an expression of love vs selfishness as a denial of it is among the strongest running themes in the series. He's a natural foil to Giygas, whose creeping influence across the world causes people to become callous, spirits to grow restless, and animals to lash out in violence.

As Ninten builds his strength and confidence up, he's able to put his altruistic urges into action. He allows himself to be taken advantage of by Podunk's scheming mayor if it means saving Pippi from zombies. He risks himself to reunite a canary with her chick, and save the Podunk zoo from Giygas' starman agent. He gets little in the way of direct rewards, other than more pieces of the melody and a chance to branch out further in his investigation.

Lloyd is another case of theming butting heads against player expectations. Earthbound Beginnings catches a lot of flak for its character balance. People normally mean Lloyd when they bring it up. He's the first long-term party member Ninten recruits (Pippi only stays with him for a short hike to her home). Lloyd is a brilliant child with an exceptional aptitude for science and engineering. As expected of his archetype, he's physically unimpressive, timid, and prone to hiding in trashcans to avoid school bullies. Once Ninten extends a compassionate hand, though, Lloyd becomes a loyal friend despite his fears.

Unfortunately, Lloyd is something of a liability in combat for a solid chunk of the game. Having two party members is an obvious improvement over Ninten going it solo, but Lloyd lags behind Ninten in HP and physical damage output. He's able to use offensive consumable items in battle and those are the first means the player has access to hitting multiple enemies at once. Those items, however, have drawbacks. They take up slots in an already-limited inventory that often need to be reserved for healing items and key items. They're strong against early-game enemies, but it often doesn't feel worth it to spend them on regular encounters when Ninten (or later Ana) could probably finish the job on their next turn. Their usefulness scales badly with general progression: I wasn't even using them after a while. It felt like a better plan to stuff Lloyd's backpack with healing items and just have him use normal attacks when nobody needed them. I get why it feels frustrating as a player to cart around a party member who isn't pulling their weight. Hell, I even felt relief when Teddy booted him out of the party temporarily. But my thoughts changed when I started just taking a turn in combat to use buffing PSI skills on him. Boost his attack, give him a shield, and he's plenty able to hold his own. Having Lloyd on the team teaches the player to not just have each character toss out their strongest moves each turn and judge them by those metrics. Besides, he's the key to tackling a lot of non-combat problems thanks to his ability to fix up vehicles. He just needs a little help from his friends to shine.

Ana is the next to join the team. Both the game and supplemental materials emphasize her kindness and empathy (her character profile mentions that she stopped a frog dissection in school). Ninten and Lloyd meet her in the frozen, isolated village of Snowman, where she lives with her father in the local church. Her mother had gone missing, and is later revealed to have been kidnapped by Giygas' minions along with the adults of Youngtown. Ana is famous among the townspeople for her incredible psychic powers.

Earthbound Beginnings' message that true strength comes from a place of love and compassion is hammered home with Ana's character, both narratively and mechanically. She fills the archetype of the party's mage, trading physical durability for incredible offensive, healing, and support skills.

She's the only character in the game capable of learning damage-dealing PSI abilities, but she's needed for her shielding and stat-boosting powers just as often.

Much of Earthbound Beginnings' depictions of love are familial, platonic, or altruistic. The exception comes with Ana and Ninten. Ana had recurring dreams about Ninten before the game began, and knew that he would come to see her in advance. After trudging their way through the deadly caves below Mt. Itoi and finding a solitary cabin for a brief respite, Ninten and Ana find themselves alone together for the first time in their journey. She asks him to dance with her.

The NES has limited language to convey emotions. Text, music, and sprite animation are the only tools available. Due to the hardware's memory constraints, animations have to be limited and reusable. You can compare it to early films, in which melodrama, dialogue cards, and theatrical framing were used to convey complex stories and character relationships. Ninten and Ana's dance makes incredible use of these tools; they come together and separate, they twirl one another around. The music evokes memories of old twinkly music boxes. Simple but effective blocking in their movement leads the imagination to fill in the gaps. Clockwork dancers atop the music box, leaving hardship and tragedy behind for a brief moment. Ana reveals her dreams and confesses to Ninten that she has loved him since she first saw him, before they met. The player is given the option to reciprocate her feelings.

Ninten and Ana are kids, straddling that line between childhood crushes and adolescent romance. It's up to the player whether they explore those feelings further or not. The story will play out the same way regardless; tragedy comes knocking in the form of a giant killer robot.

Teddy is far and away my favorite character in this game and has landed a spot among my top RPG characters. He's a boisterous greaser punk with a big attitude and a bigger heart. He also serves as an important counterweight to Ninten and the gang, again both in the narrative and in combat mechanics. While Ninten, Ana, and Lloyd all serve to cover each other's weaknesses and highlight each other's strengths in battle, Teddy is more than comfortable going it alone. He can hit harder and take more punishment than the three kids combined.

He has exclusive mastery over the game's strongest weapons and can bowl over enemies in one or two strikes that would otherwise savage the rest of the party. Teddy doesn't have access to a single PSI power, preferring to let his incredible strength break through every obstacle in his way. He's refreshingly straightforward and fun to use. The game usually asks you to plan each turn carefully and accept that everything can go south quickly because the main cast can get KO'd from one or two unlucky turns. Teddy almost feels like a chance to get revenge on a brutal and unforgiving world. When you've got a big enough hammer, every problem is functionally a nail.

Upon reaching the city of Ellay, Ninten, Ana, and Lloyd find it overrun by the "B.B. Gang," a crew of hooded criminals menacing the local populace. The law is no help and the kids are forced to knock some sense into the B.B. members who attack them. They hear rumors of the B.B. Gang's leader, and lure him out by performing a song onstage at Ellay's biggest club, the Live House. Teddy bursts in, and congratulates the kids on their courage. He still has to fight them, of course. Fair's fair.

After being suitably impressed, Teddy joins the crew. He immediately boots Lloyd out of the party and leaves him at the Live House, claiming the boy is too weak for what comes next.

Teddy's obsession with strength was born of loss and grief. Speaking with Ellay residents provides clues to how Teddy became a terror. By all accounts, he was a kindhearted child, if something of a muscle-headed troublemaker. At fourteen, his parents were killed while exploring Mt. Itoi. He spent the intervening years drowning himself in rage and alcohol, gathering power by taking over the B.B. Gang, and waiting for a chance for revenge on the creatures who took his family from him.

Ninten and Ana wind up press-ganged into his vengeance quest. Mt. Itoi is labyrinthian, perilous, and unforgiving. It houses many of the game's most powerful foes. Having Teddy around mitigates the danger somewhat, but it's still the game's most difficult zone. After the brutal climb, the party reaches the cabin. Teddy excuses himself to, "make some phone calls," allowing Ninten and Ana their time to dance together. However, the party's moment for rest and romance is interrupted by R-7038, one of Giygas' most powerful robot underlings.

None of them stand a chance. Ninten and Ana are likely to be dispatched first, with Teddy lingering on for a few more turns due to his larger HP pool. He swings helplessly at the mechanical beast, barely scratching it. All that strength, all those years buried in rage, all the best equipment the game has to offer, and he can barely put a dent in R-7038's armor. It's Lloyd who ends up saving their lives, destroying R-7038 from offscreen with a tank from earlier in their adventure he repaired. The kid left behind for his weakness swallowed his fear and salvaged an impossible situation. Combat proficiency isn't everything.

Teddy is injured in the attack, forcing him out of the group for the remainder of the game. His last words to the party are an admission that his way was wrong. "There's no way we can beat 'em with brute strength alone. But we CAN bring peace back to the world. I just know it." Teddy made himself as strong as a person could be by shunning kindness and letting his grief be subsumed by anger. It wasn't enough, and it could never be enough. Not in this story. Thankfully, a bit of the kind boy he used to be was brought back out by the time he spent with Ninten and Ana. Giygas would have to be fought another way.

Giygas, terror of the cosmos, is unseen until the game's final sequences. Instead, his influence is seen in the changes to the world he wrought.

He inflicts his own spite and selfishness upon others, twisting them in his own image. He robs Youngtown of all its adults, including Ana's mother, leaving children without parents just as George and Maria were taken from him. He raises the dead as zombies in Podunk, stirs restless spirits in Snowman, drives the animals of the Merrysville zoo into a violent frenzy, and assaults other areas with starmen, mooks, and all manner of other monsters. One of the most despicable acts a cruel man can do is make others like him.

Giygas is monstrously powerful. Like Teddy, he experienced the care of a loving family and devoted himself to gathering strength when his parents were ripped away from him. He sought revenge on the only target he could blame: the Earth, the world that George left him and Maria behind to protect. If PSI abilities are a reflection of a person's inner heart, then Giygas would seem to have discarded his.

When he strikes, the game tells you that you cannot comprehend the nature of his attacks. You only see that Ninten, Ana, and Lloyd are badly hurt. Love turned inhuman. But I think it goes both ways. PSI is a bridge connecting hearts and minds, just as it connected Ninten to Ana, Lloyd, Teddy, Maria, George, the family waiting for him at home, and all the people he helped on his quest. If you cannot comprehend Giygas, Giygas cannot comprehend you.

There is a brief moment at the beginning of the fight in which Giygas thanks Ninten's family for raising him and offers to spare Ninten alone.

He quickly retracts his offer, but that moment reveals something more to him. His heart is not fully gone, merely drowned in spite and hate. He couldn't destroy his empathy, but merely chained it and turned it into his only weakness. A weakness revealed in music. Earthbound Beginnings' soundtrack is vital in the communication of its themes. A vocal album was released alongside the game, giving lyrics to the catchy tunes. "Introduction," the title theme, feels like a lullaby but with a slightly sad, haunting undercurrent. It's not often that I'll leave a game on the title screen to hear it just a bit longer, but I did nearly every time I fired the game up.

"Pollyanna (I Believe in You)" plays as the overworld theme for when Ninten is traveling alone and centers around the singer's unshakable faith in the beauty of the world and of the subject of the song, no matter how naive or childish it may seem. It's replaced by the similarly upbeat ditty, "Being Friends," once Ninten has traveling companions. "All that I Needed Was You," my personal favorite of the soundtrack, is a relentlessly catchy pop romance song that Ninten, Ana, and Lloyd sing live on stage to prove their courage to Teddy. "Fall'n Love" is the sweet and slow ballad that sells Ninten and Ana's dance scene and elevates it from simple sprite rotations to a sweet and sincere pantomime.

"Eight Melodies" is the climactic song that ties it all together though.

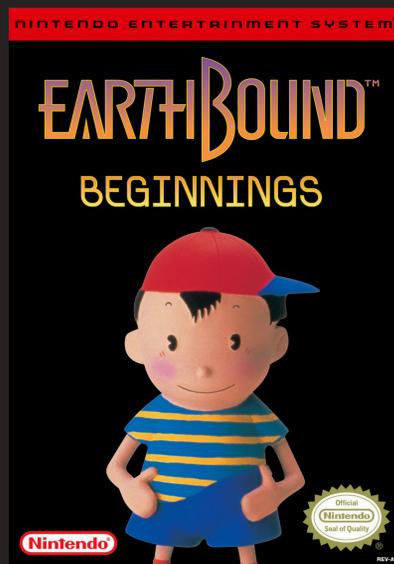
The melodies may be the most important thematic throughline of the game. Ninten's journey is focused on collecting and assembling eight melodies to form a song. Ninten's journey is focused on collecting and assembling eight melodies to form a song.



Ninten finds most of them by helping others: removing a poltergeist from his sister's doll, reuniting a canary with her chick, saving a singing monkey from one of Giygas' Starmen, investigating a haunted mansion on behalf of a terrified town, and visiting a lonely cactus. Others he is given through the gifts passed on from George and Maria: by challenging the dragon, hearing the dying song of EVE after she sacrifices herself to protect him, and by putting to rest the spirits of his great-grandparents. Only when the melodies are fully assembled can Maria reclaim her memories, impart knowledge of the true nature of Giygas to Ninten, and leave her torment behind to rejoin her lost husband. Magicant fades away in a bittersweet passing. Ninten has lost a place of comfort and safety but carries Maria's love with him to face his greatest challenge.

Giygas cannot be fought conventionally. The only way to stop his rampage is for the party to sing the eight melodies, one after another. The melodies combine to form the lullaby Maria used to sing to Giygas as a child. Ninten learns in Magicant that Giygas hated music and would react to it as if scolded; and yet the song reveals in him a small measure of guilt and shame that would be his undoing. We all remember those annoying habits our parents had that drove us crazy, but they were a part of our relationship to them as much as any cherished moment. When the player begins to sing, he first demands they stop. He interrupts the song. As the player persists, he screams for them to stop, lashes out further, and finally begs. The mightiest being, brought low by shame, and reduced to begging a child to stop reminding him of what he was and what he lost. Unable to bear the song any longer, Giygas leaves, swearing revenge. Music, the universal language of the heart, has brought the savage beast that Giygas molded himself into to heel.

Earthbound Beginnings is a complex and richly textured experience beneath the surface of a simple sci-fi melodrama. It's a game that asks little except that you take it on its own terms and open your heart to struggle and grief, as a player and as a reader of stories, to make the triumphs of love mean that much more. "No crying until the end," says the game's tagline. I couldn't manage it. See if you can.



**HOW LONG TO BEAT**

**~ 20 HOURS**

**DEVELOPER**

**APE INC.**

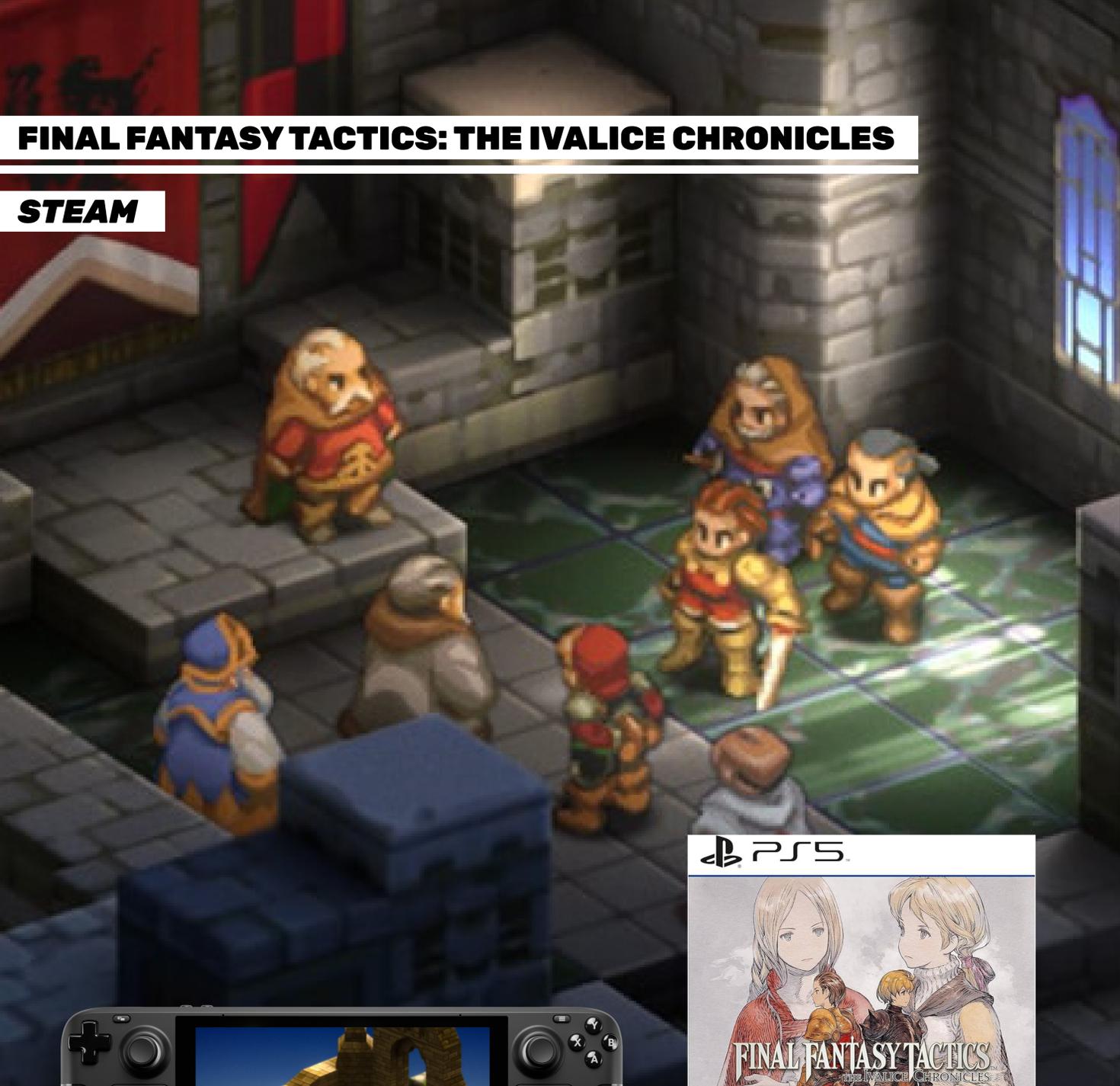
**RELEASED**

**1989**

WRITTEN BY CASEY GIBSON

FINAL FANTASY TACTICS: THE IVALICE CHRONICLES

STEAM



HOW LONG TO BEAT

~ 40 HOURS

DEVELOPER

SQUARE ENIX

RELEASED

2025

RECOMMENDED VERSION

Any version of Final Fantasy Tactics is the one to play, but the new modern remake available on all platforms is arguably the best. With voice acting, speed up and a number of other quality of life improvements, The Ivalice Chronicles comes in first, with the War of the Lions version (PSP) a close second.

This is one of those games I've always had a special place in my heart for, but have not actually beaten. So once the remaster was announced, I knew the time to change that fact had finally come...

There's definitely a learning curve to the job system and how things work with different sub job abilities you can unlock. I found myself struggling early on until I unlocked the auto potion ability and suddenly I didn't need to use all my actions on healing and could be on the offensive. Experimenting with which jobs pair together nicely is really satisfying and even if you find yourself leveling the "wrong" job, it usually won't be for nought, since it could be on the path to unlock a new job all together.

I not only love the gameplay, but the writing and characters as well. The story is full of intrigue with political unrest in a post war world where you'll learn not trust anyone you meet. Frankly things can be a bit disorienting at first, especially with some of the wild character names, however this version has wonderful features in the menu to be able to rewatch or brush up on the story from any point in the game. Overall I couldn't be happier with FFT and can't wait to see how the story concludes.



WRITTEN BY PAIGE CHAMBERLAIN

METAL SLIME FARMING

FIRST DRAGON QUEST



WRITTEN BY PAIGE CHAMBERLAIN

My first experience with Dragon Quest was the 2017 3DS port of Dragon Quest VIII: Journey of the Cursed King. It was one of the last 3DS games I put real time into. It's also why I name all my characters "Paige" now; I mistakenly thought I was naming the save file rather than the hero. Even back then, I only ever said "ow" when Jessica got hit.

I will say it took me quite some time into the game before I knew I was enjoying the experience and I likely persisted out of not having much else to do at that time. I'm not sure what the exact point was but I assume it's somewhere-in the story that started to pick up, or maybe it was when I found out my handy dandy metal slime trick.

Paige's Handy Dandy Metal Slime Trick

On the 3DS version of Dragon Quest VIII, rotating the camera 360 degrees will respawn enemies. So, once you've found a slime heavy population simply turn the camera around until you find your shiny metallic punching bags.

Which was very useful, as I refused to engage with an important game mechanic: Tension. This is where you would spend turns building a multiplier for whatever you had planned. I even beat the original post-game without using it, and I did part of the extra 3DS content aside from the boss "rush," as one of the particular bosses is—as the guides say—a total crapshoot.

As it was my first time playing an entry in the series, I found it certainly wasn't charmless at all; the visuals were fantastic and the music amazing. I have come to love the common tropes these games share, along with other things that have lately been removed for "quality of life reasons," because apparently that's more important than the charm of bumping your head on a ceiling. Being my initial experience meant it was also my debut to the cast of monsters, meaning I got genuinely jumpscared by some Living Statues I found in a tower.

I was absolutely enthralled with the sense of adventure I got to experience, being able to thoroughly explore a world at my own peril. Once I got a ship and could make my way to the Western side of the world I didn't understand a particular geographical term so I landed straight onto the eastern side when I was supposed to follow the river along. I did think the sudden vast increase in enemy levels was a mean spike but I honestly didn't even know I wasn't meant to go there until much later when I explored a nearly superfluous town and they were talking about a problem I had already resolved. Sadly, it also meant I completely missed the sabrecats and had no idea they were a thing until some years later.

The additional party members in the 3DS version were fun to have but I didn't use them too much. The main cast themselves were a joy, the party chat system helps with that, though it took me quite a while to warm up to Angelo. It's also the first time I've ever been actually compelled to save the damsel in distress, which is certainly a trope that could be helped a lot more by employing the simple technique of getting to know both the damsel in question and their suffering.

Story wise it's not super atypical to a normal JRPG with tragedy, some evil members of the Church, and a macguffin search but I found it well written and a great game to get me more into the genre I wasn't super familiar with. I also became familiar with the whole getting sent back to just before the final boss and not actually getting to explore the world at peace thing I'm less a fan of! I really really wanted to see Castle Trodain not covered in VINES!!!

I do have to say the true ending of Dragon Quest VIII is almost the same ending as Space Balls and I still find it incredibly funny.



Perhaps the real love affair began when I laid my eyes up on the "Jargon"

HOW LONG TO BEAT

~ 75 HOURS

DEVELOPER

LEVEL - 5

RELEASED

2004 (PS2)  
2016(3DS)

# ANIMAL CROSSING: NEW HORIZONS

SWITCH 2 EDITION: 3.0 UPDATE



WRITTEN BY PAIGE CHAMBERLAIN

Back on my “cozy” games foray again, which seems to always align with the first two months of the year, I purchased the \$8.00 (AUD) upgrade for Animal Crossing New Horizons to once again experience fighting with the megaphone item.

Most of the new content was part of the free update which basically brings the kind of thing you can do in the Happy Home Paradise DLC to players who couldn't be bothered to pay for it, with more decorating to do. One fun thing about all the tourists in town is that you can assign them two uniforms to choose from. Every visitor in my town dressed as either Luigi or Princess Peach. I did like that we finally got some Nintendo consoles with ROMS loaded but alas it's tied to a subscription which is pretty darn mean for the handful of poors who don't pay for NSO. I did love some of the new Lego and The Legend of Zelda items and am enjoying the company of my dear deer Mineru but I'm pretty well done with it already.



HOW LONG TO BEAT

INFINITE

DEVELOPER

NINTENDO

RELEASED

2020



# IRON LUNG

CINEMA REVIEW  
BY PAIGE CHAMBERLAIN

Iron Lung is an indie horror film based on the game of the same name, set within a windowless submarine submerged in an alien ocean of blood. The project is entirely self-funded by the popular YouTuber Markiplier, who was so inspired by David Szymanski's original game that he chose to produce, direct, and star in the adaptation.

Simon is a prisoner, taking on a job at the behest of his captors to be welded inside of a submarine to explore a moon that is entirely nothing but an ocean of blood. His task is simply to take photographs at set points because the near totalled remains of the space stranded human population really needs a way to sustain life. I thought the end-of-the-world building gave you enough to understand the character although it did make me want to know more than I was allowed to. The background of Simon is presented in flashbacks and conversations he makes and it is enough to inform his character arc which goes through a very natural course.

Asides from the opening and ending shots the entirety of the film is set inside this small submarine whose only window has to be closed to avoid breakage. The set looked fantastic and there was plenty of camera work to ensure it wasn't boring to watch. Markiplier's character Simon is almost the only person you'll see for the vast majority of the time, although he isn't always alone, at least when the radio is working.

I'm not really a horror fan because I don't like being scared and I'm not big on gore, but this movie wasn't very scary. And while there is some physical harm depicted it wasn't excessive, although it did look very well done. While the film's runtime doubles that of the average gameplay there was enough of a flow to the sequence of events that it didn't feel protracted.

Initially seeing Markiplier act in a solo capacity felt as if I was watching someone I knew personally act in a film or show with no change to their accent or appearance. I have to wonder if the movie was filmed sequentially as it felt that Mark's acting improved the further on the movie went. I do have to imagine the popularity of this film is largely backed by his fanbase as going into the cinema on the opening screening was the first time I'd gone to see a movie where no-one in attendance appeared to be much older than thirty.

I can't speak much more of it without spoiling the story but I will say it's a must watch for anyone who is interested in the premise. I'm truly looking forward to his next movie project. Really, I'm just glad it managed to make it into my local (and only) cinema.

WRITTEN BY CASEY GIBSON

# FINAL FANTASY VII REMAKE

NINTENDO SWITCH 2



WRITTEN BY DAVID LLOYD

After decades of being starved of premier Final Fantasy titles, Nintendo loyalists finally have access to experiences once thought impossible for a handheld device. Leveraging the bolstered specs of the Switch 2, fans can now dive into one of Square Enix's crowning achievements: Final Fantasy VII Remake Intergrade, which officially arrived on January 22, 2026.

When Remake first debuted on the PS4 in 2020, its lush environments and high-fidelity character models pushed that hardware to its absolute limit. Remarkably, the Switch 2 maintains a stable 30 FPS while delivering impressive lighting and texture detail in the palm of your hand. While minor concessions were made regarding texture resolution and asset pop-in, the overall image quality remains sharp, a feat further enhanced by the Switch 2's vibrant new display.

The market response was instantaneous. Within days of launch, physical copies vanished from shelves, confirming long-standing speculation that Square Enix had been ignoring a massive, untapped audience.

By early February, the publisher confirmed that physical stock for Remake, and pre-orders for its sequel, Final Fantasy VII Rebirth, had completely sold out on their official US storefront. This tidal wave of new players, many of whom missed the initial PlayStation exclusivity window, is surely a welcome sight for a Square Enix executive team often characterized by their "perpetual disappointment" in sales figures.

For the Nintendo community, Intergrade represents more than just a port; it is a full-circle moment for two titans of the industry. Following their infamous fallout at the dawn of the 3D era, a true "reunion" finally feels like it's on the horizon. In a recent interview with Easy Allies, director Naoki Hamaguchi fueled this fire by confirming that the third and final installment of the trilogy will be a multi-platform launch, with PS5, PC, and Switch 2 versions all scheduled to release simultaneously.



THE FIRST LOCKDOWN FORCED ME TO ABANDON MY PS4 PHYSICAL COPY

I've been wanting to replay Remake for a while now, but I never found the right time to dive in. That changed when Best Buy gave me a \$10 credit just before launch; coupled with the physical copy including a Magic: The Gathering Final Fantasy booster pack, I was sold

I expected the 90+ GB download to take an eternity, but my internet cooperated, and to my surprise, I was playing on launch day. The Switch 2 version runs at a stable 30fps in both handheld and docked modes; while I miss the PS5's 60fps, the game still looks and feels great.

The added portability has been a lifesaver—while it's not my primary way to play, it's perfect for those nights when my son needs someone in the room to help him fall asleep.

Anyone who knows me knows that Final Fantasy VII is my favorite in the series and one of my top games of all time. Revisiting Remake with a fresh perspective on the story has been a blast. I'm indulging in every side quest this time and realizing I missed some great moments on my first playthrough. I'm sure this will lead me right into Rebirth later this year as we creep toward the final part's release.



HOW LONG TO BEAT

~ 40 HOURS

DEVELOPER

SQUARE ENIX

RELEASED

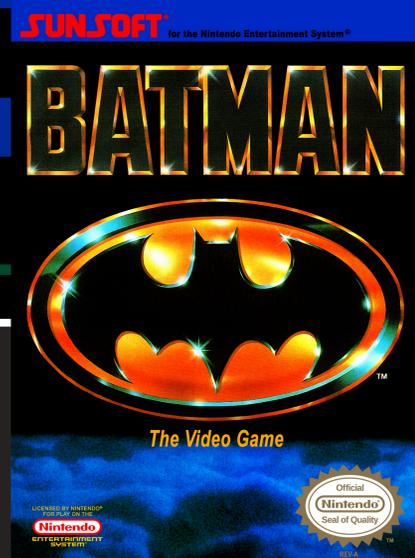
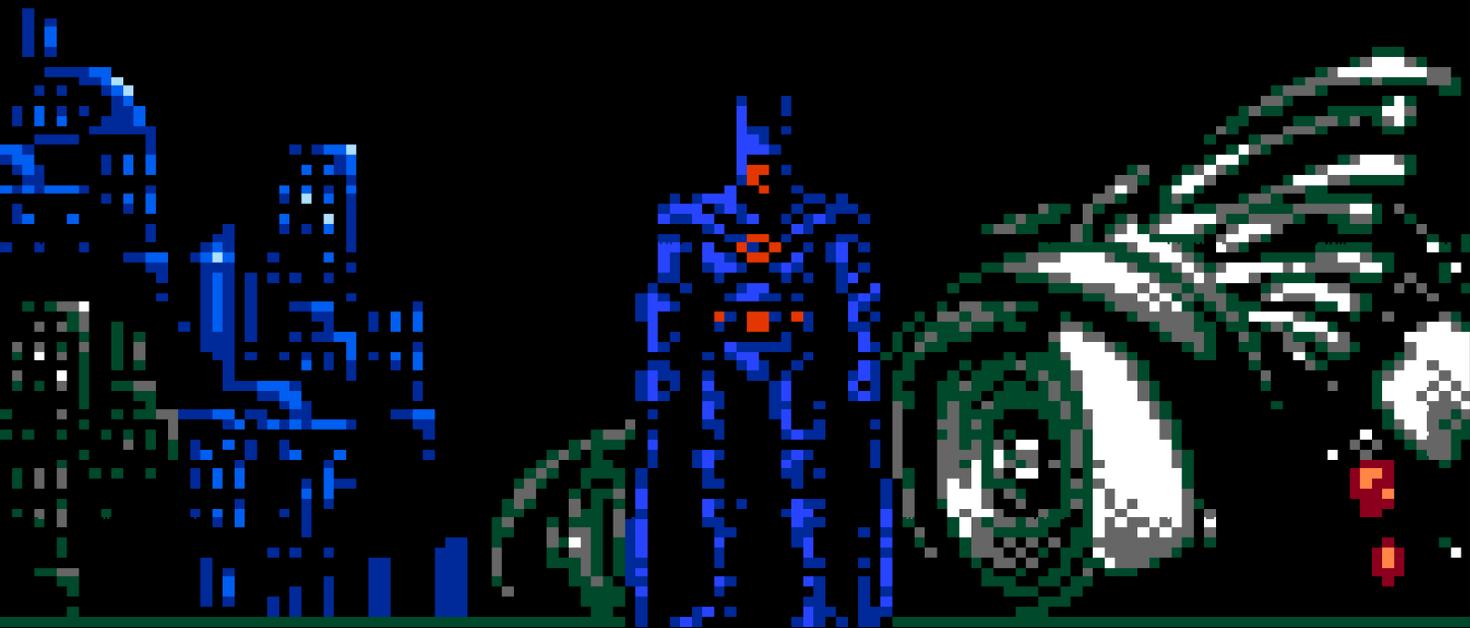
2020



WRITTEN BY DAVID LLOYD

**BATMAN: THE VIDEO GAME**

**NINTENDO ENTERTAINMENT SYSTEM**



**HOW LONG TO BEAT**

**~ 2 HOURS**

**DEVELOPER**

**SUNSOFT**

**RELEASED**

**1990**

**RECOMMENDED VERSION**

Sunsoft made a lot of different versions for a whole lot of platforms. Each one looks and plays much different than the rest, whether it's the NES, Game Boy or TurboGrafx 16 ports. Deciding which one is best is all dependent on the person. But I'll always default to the Nintendo Entertainment System.

Batman: The Video Game is undoubtedly one of the toughest NES titles I've ever played. Without the help of save states, my playthrough likely wouldn't have lasted more than 30 minutes. I'd like to say the effort was worth it, that the agony ended with a true sense of accomplishment. Unfortunately, the payoff was an ending that not only deviates from the movie but fundamentally contradicts everything Batman stands for.

This Sunsoft-developed action-platformer is a fascinating curiosity, very little of the game actually represents the Caped Crusader or the Tim Burton film, aside from Batman himself. It wasn't until the Joker arrived as the final boss that I saw a truly recognizable element of the Batman universe. If I had to guess, I'd bet this project began as an original IP and morphed into a licensed title midway through development.

That isn't to say the game is irredeemable. Despite the crushing difficulty, the combat and platforming are top-notch. Controlling the Dark Knight feels great, and as 8-bit games go, the technical polish is impressive. The soundtrack is also frequently cited as one of the best on the NES, and I'll admit it has a permanent spot on my own daily playlist.

Ultimately, it feels as though Sunsoft set out to develop a Ninja Gaiden clone and pivoted once they secured the license (I have no evidence to back this up). If you go in expecting a tough-as-nails action-platformer and bring plenty of patience, it's a rewarding way to spend a few hours. Just don't expect it to stay true to the Dark Knight's code.



*Still my favourite Batmobile*



*Not sure who this is supposed to be*



WRITTEN BY DAVID LLOYD

# CASTLEVANIA II: BELMONT'S REVENGE

GAME BOY



## HOW LONG TO BEAT

~ 2 HOURS

## DEVELOPER

KONAMI

## RELEASED

1991

## RECOMMENDED VERSION

The only way to play Belmont's Revenge on a modern device is to purchase the Castlevania: Anniversary Collection which is available on all major platforms.

Games Included:

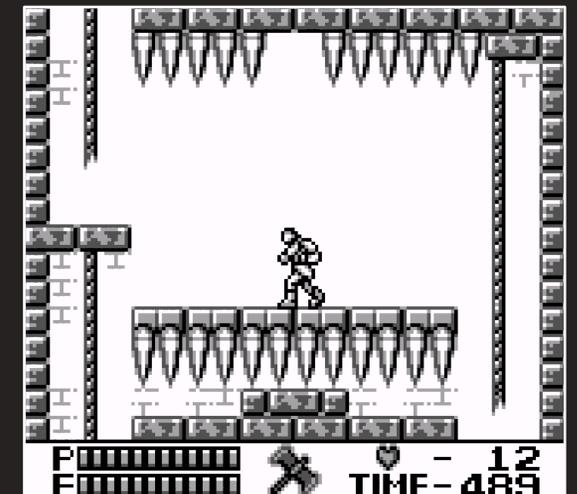
- Castlevania
- Castlevania II Simon's Quest
- Castlevania III Dracula's Curse
- Super Castlevania IV
- Castlevania: The Adventure
- Castlevania II Belmont's Revenge
- Castlevania Bloodlines
- Kid Dracula Quest

Castlevania titles have always been hit-or-miss for me. My enjoyment usually hinges on how crisp and fluid the movement feels, with Symphony of the Night being one of my favorites, while Super Castlevania IV fell short of my expectations. Belmont's Revenge falls somewhere in between—a pleasant, short playthrough with decent controls that still provides a classic Konami experience.

The game continues the story of Christopher Belmont, the protagonist of the earlier Game Boy title, Castlevania: The Adventure. This time, Christopher is on a mission to rescue his son after Dracula transforms him into a demon. To do so, Christopher must conquer four distinct levels which can be tackled in any order before the final confrontation with the Prince of Darkness.

While the movement is a bit stiff due to the hardware, the controls are responsive enough that I thoroughly enjoyed the few hours it took to reach the credits. The levels are linear affairs where the goal is simply to reach the end and take out the boss. Fortunately, the difficulty isn't punishingly high, as the classic sub-weapons provide just enough of a boost to navigate the tougher sections.

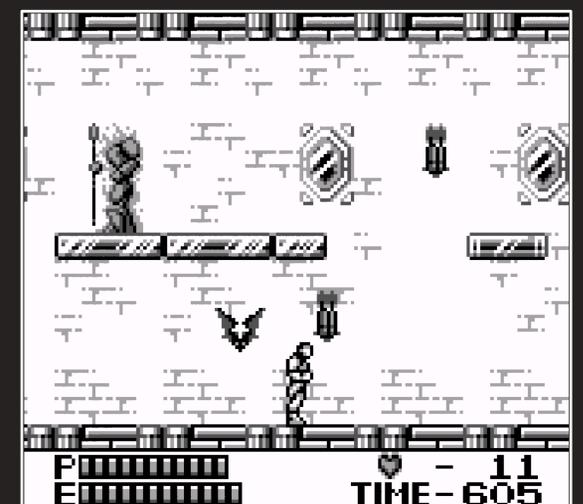
Konami titles are famous for their soundtracks, and Belmont's Revenge is no exception. The Game Boy's sound chip might not be the most impressive hardware, but Konami's composers always found a way to push past those limitations. Belmont's Revenge is a terrific example of how a handheld title can punch above its weight through strong visuals, atmospheric music, and well-designed dungeon layouts.



No long backtracking required



Headless enemies around every corner

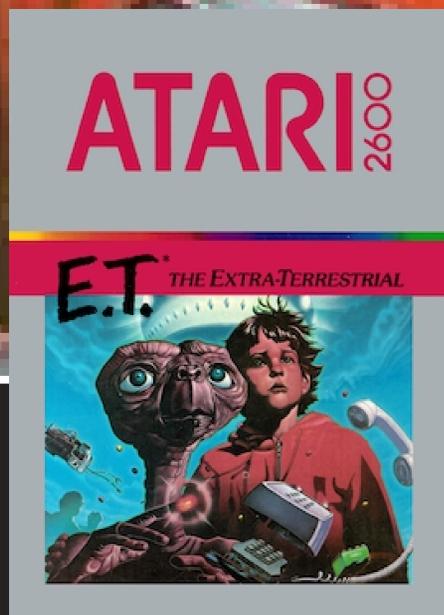


★★★★☆

WRITTEN BY DAVID LLOYD

E.T. - THE EXTRA-TERRESTRIAL

ATARI 2600



HOW LONG TO BEAT

~ 1 HOUR

DEVELOPER

ATARI, INC.

RELEASED

1982

FACT FROM FICTION

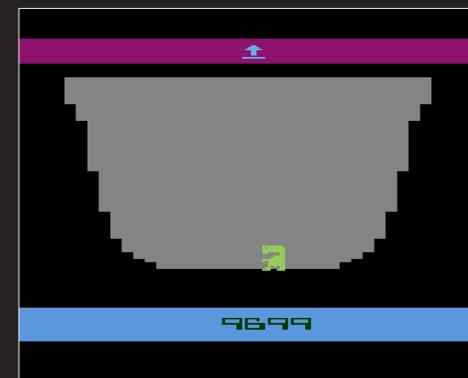
Hundreds of thousands of copies of this game were found in a landfill covered in cement, this is fact. The reason is often shrouded in fiction. This game was not the sole reason for the American video game crash, and the thousands of copies ended up in the trash for the same reason so many other decisions are made: Money. It was cheaper for Atari to dump them than do anything else with them. The cement was to stop the local kids from digging through the trash.

Thanks to the Angry Video Game Nerd, most people know E.T. The Extra-Terrrestrial as "The Worst Video Game Ever Made." For me, however, it was the game I played on Sunday afternoons while visiting my grandparents. I'd spend hours on my dad's old Atari 2600, cycling through his limited library until it was time to go home. It may not have been the best game, but it was there for me when I needed it.

Unfortunately, I didn't have the instruction manual, or didn't think to read it which is absolutely essential if you want any hope of understanding the objectives. Even with the manual, the gameplay is completely unintuitive. The goal of the game is to find the three parts of the telephone before E.T. runs out of energy. All can be found at the bottom of different pits which the game randomly places at the start.

If you understand the point of the game and how it works, it's not actually that hard. Getting caught by the FBI agent removes a telephone part, and the Scientist simply brings you to the blue sector. If E.T. runs low on energy, he can trade some Reese's Pieces for a refill.

Atari 2600 games are fairly hard to go back to in general. The system shows its age and most are very simplistic. As Digital Eclipse has proven, sometimes it's just fun to look back on a piece of history. The legacy of E.T. may forever be linked to failure but it's certainly not the worst video game of all time, certainly not when Final Fantasy XV Pocket Edition exists.



Good luck getting out of the pit



All the buildings are in one sector



**NEXT ISSUE\***



## **BACKLOGS ARE MADE TO BE IGNORED**

Please Understand... We make plans and intend to stick with them, but then, Square Enix shadows drops a Paranormasight sequel. Stuff happens. No matter what, next issue we'll have a lot of games to share with something interesting to say about them.

In the meantime, if you made it this far, maybe let a friend or two know about this great new magazine. Or if you really enjoyed it and want to ensure more get made, consider supporting us at [Patreon.com/TheThirstyMage](https://Patreon.com/TheThirstyMage).

See you next issue!  
- David

**\*Subject to Change**

